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AUTHOR Pruitt, Randall P.
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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges of a communication instructor is how to initiate the discussion of ethics in the university classroom. The classic film, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," has proved a useful tool for initiating discussion of ethical decision-making in leadership. This film presents a young and idealistic leader of boy ranger clubs who is appointed to the senate because he does not appear to be a threat to the graft of the state political machine. When he is framed for misconduct by one of the corrupt politicians, he holds a 23-hour filibuster prompting that politician to admit his guilt. The viewing of the film is preceded by a class session covering basic ethical positions such as the ethics of ends, means, the state, the marketplace of ideas, the situation, absolutism, legality, and what a person can get away with. The film can then be viewed and analyzed using instructional strategies such as: (1) giving the students a short questionnaire that deals with ethics and leadership, ethical dilemmas, and the relevancy of the movie to today's world; and (2) asking the students to generate their own list of questions about ethics and leadership. Both strategies are designed to act as a springboard for discussion. A third strategy is to assign a 5-page reaction-paper asking students to analyze the ethical position of one of the characters in the movie, and to discuss their personal positions on leadership and ethics. (PRA)

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Mr. Smith Goes To Washington:
A Resource For Examing Ethical Leadership In Decision-Making

By Randall P. Pruitt
Bowling Green State University

Central States Communication Association
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Introduction

Some two-thousand years ago, the philosopher Diogenes traveled ancient Greece carrying a burning lantern in his hand. Legend says he was searching for a man of integrity (Bridgewater, 1953). The search for integrity continues today as corporations, universities, and governments struggle with ethical dilemmas that would cause even Diogenes to pause. In fact, integrity in leadership has become big business. James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1990) spent six years interviewing over 7,500 managers nationwide to determine what they looked for and admired in their leaders. Their research indicated, among other things, that followers look for leaders who are honest, fair-minded, dependable, and inspiring. Warren Bennis (1989) in his book, Why Leaders Can't Lead, suggests that one of the elements crucial to all organizations is trust -- the ability to demonstrate constancy and reliability. Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale, co-authors of The Power of Ethical Management, have suggested similarly, that effective leaders and ethical leaders are one and the same (Fernicola, 1988).

One challenge that educators in the field of communication face today involves how to initiate the discussion of ethics in the university classroom. Determining instructional strategies that provide opportunity for the discussion of ethics are an important part of meeting this challenge. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of the classic film, "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" as a tool for initiating discussion of ethical decision-making in leadership.

About the Film

"Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" was produced and directed by Frank Capra, and released by Columbia Studios in October of 1939. The film was nominated for a number of Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actor (Jimmy Stewart), and Best Director (Capra). The film was part of an unusually strong group of contenders that year and was eventually overshadowed by two other great motion pictures -- "Goodbye Mr. Chips," and "Gone With The Wind" (Thomas, 1988), (Jones, McClure, & Twomey, 1970).

Jimmy Stewart stars in the title role of the film as Jefferson Smith, a young, patriotic, somewhat idealistic leader of a network of boy ranger clubs. Smith (Stewart), is unexpectedly appointed to a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate because the political powers of the state perceive him as someone who will be popular, but offer no threat to the graft of Boss Jim Taylor's (Edward Arnold) state political machine. Smith goes to Washington and very quickly encounters a cynical press and a hard-ball playing Congress. He is eventually framed for misconduct by those he seeks to expose. Disillusioned, he decides to head back home only to be told the real story about his misconduct charges by his tough but sympathetic secretary Saunders (Jean Arthur). Smith returns to address the Senate and speaks for 23 straight hours in an attempt to convince others of the political graft in his state. Smith eventually collapses on the Senate floor, prompting Senator Paine (Claude Rains), the senior Senator from Smith's home state, to admit his guilt to the entire Senate .

Student Responses To The Film

Despite the fact that the film is over 50 years old, it has been used in conjunction with an upper-level leadership course taught by this instructor over the last two years. Response to the film, from the students enrolled in the course, has been very favorable. In one assignment students were asked to write a reaction paper to the movie. Here are a few excerpted comments from the students enrolled in the course during the fall of 1990:

"This film does a wonderful job of depicting how leadership is handled from an ethical point of view."

"It is a shame that political leaders today do not always possess the ethical position and diligence of a Jefferson Smith. It is a further discomfort to know that the (Boss) Taylors of the world really do exist -- possessing real power but lacking all decent common rightness or ethical character."

"As a student of journalism, I found the rigid position of the journalists most interesting. In the movie, as well as in current TV shows the role of journalist is always portrayed as a cold-hearted, egocentric person out to 'scoop' the other news agencies. 'Mr. Smith Goes To Washington' is a classic example."

"One can watch 'Mr. Smith Goes To Washington' and assume that truth will always prevail. But, I believe, especially in today's society, that this statement does not always seem to hold true. There are so many unethical and dishonest people in the world today that come out ahead of good, honest people."

"It was evident to me that even the students who thought the film was 'corny' at first, were grinding their teeth with the rest of us near the end."

Instructional Strategies

From an instructional standpoint, the viewing of the film is preceded by a class session that covers a number of basic ethical positions. One purpose in providing a general overview of ethical positions is that it exposes the student to a variety of viewpoints. Here are just a few of the ethical positions we discuss with a brief definition of each. Remember this is not intended to be an all-inclusive listing, it is just a sample of what could be covered. To develop an in-depth understanding of many of the major ethical positions, consult the additional sources section in Ethics In Human Communication (3rd Edition) by Richard L. Johannessen (1990).

The Ethic of Ends - basically adds up the advantages and disadvantages and looks at the final tally -- i.e. the end result. This ethic is not as concerned with the means of achieving the end as it is with the end result itself.

The Ethic of Means - This ethic places more emphasis upon the way something is accomplished (means) rather than focusing on what the end result will be.

The Ethic of the State - This ethic suggests that the standards of value by which an individual is evaluated must be the standards established by the society. This may vary depending upon the mores applied at the time the persuading is being done. (Consider the use of propaganda during war).

Ethic of the Marketplace of Ideas - this ethic implies free access to both the buyer and seller; a place where whoever will can come; where ideas compete and the best always survives.

Ethic Of the Situation - What is ethical is determined by the circumstances -- by the situation. What may be justified or "right" today, may not be justified or "right" tomorrow.

Ethic of Absolutism - This ethic suggests that there are absolutes. There is black and white -- a right and wrong. An example of this would be the Judeo-Christian ethic which is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Ethic of Legality - Whatever is legal is ethical.

Ethic of what you can get away with - Whatever you can get away with without getting caught is ethical. Includes justification for the use of selfishness, intimidation, abuse of power, etc.[1]

After exposing students to a variety of ethical positions, the film can be analyzed using a number of instructional strategies. The final section of this paper gives you three ideas that have been used in the leadership course at Bowling Green. These are just to get you started. I'm quite sure you can develop a number of personal strategies using this classic American movie to liven up class discussions on ethical leadership and decision-making.

Strategy # 1 Discussion Primer

I give the students a short questionnaire to respond to outside of class. They are to write or type their answers out and bring their responses to the next class to help them during class discussion. Here is an example of one of the handouts I've used:

Mr. Smith goes to Washington

As you know, we will be discussing ethics in the next couple of class periods. Take these questions home and jot down a few of the ideas you have with regard to each of the following:

1. What does the movie "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" have to do with leadership and ethics? Write down a few of the ways the movie might apply to this area... Is there more than one level of relevance (i.e. other than the obvious, are there other deeper meanings you could see within the film?)

2. Identify at least 3 specific examples of ethical dilemmas that individual characters faced in the movie. How did the character deal with it? Was their choice ethical or unethical in your opinion? Why or why not?

3. Is the message of this movie relevant today, or do you think it is something that cannot really be applied to today's world?

Strategy #2 Question Generator

After viewing the film, I ask students to bring in a list of questions that they have about ethics and leadership (you can adapt this to whatever class you are teaching). Use these questions as a springboard to generate discussion during the following class period. Here is a small sample of types of questions students have asked when given this assignment:

1. Do you think leader's ethics are deteriorating in our society today?

2. What leadership qualities are the most important for political success?

3. What is the best thing for a person to do when they feel they are being asked to compromise their personal ethical view?

4. What ethical position do you think most politician's hold?

5. How do you deal with unethical co-workers?

6. Are people born leaders, or can they learn to be leaders?

7. Does a person change ethical positions?

Strategy #3 Reaction Paper

The following is an example of a writing assignment that I have used in the leadership class based on "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington." Again, the particulars can vary (length of paper, time to do it, etc.) but this is just to give you the basic idea.

The viewing of the classic film "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington" is included in this course for reasons that go beyond your viewing pleasure. While we all enjoy watching a good flick, I hope you will take this opportunity to examine the way leadership is handled from a variety of ethical perspectives. That is, I want you to look carefully at the major characters in the film and the ethics they employ while they make decisions at key moments. You should see quite a number of ethical approaches and justifications. Some of the things you should be looking for include:

1. Ethical Positions - (consider those we discussed in class and keep them handy during the film to help refresh your memory as you watch).

2. Main Characters - Look at the main characters and follow their decisions throughout the movie. Do the characters change or remain the same? What has affected them if they've changed? What can we learn by watching them?

Assignment: Write a short 5 page reaction paper due one week from today. Do the following:

a) Choose one of the main characters and analyze their ethical position based on examples and actions exemplified in the movie.

b) Add to your analysis your own position on leadership and ethics as it relates to you personally.

The paper will not be graded or returned, but it will be considered a part of your class participation assessment at the end of the semester.

**I also provide them with a list of the major characters in the film.

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[1] Special thanks to Dr. Don Enholm for his graduate class in ethics and persuasion at Bowling Green State University. Much of what I used here grew out of his lectures.